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ABSTRACT

Intended for upper-level students in nursing and related professions who have been selected to work as peer tutors, this book was designed to help peer tutors become a caring, competent resource for nursing students through independent study. The book attempts to lay the theoretical groundwork for understanding tutoring as a legitimate aspect of the larger field of learning assistance within a holistic framework. After a brief introduction, unit 1, "Orientation to Tutoring," describes attributes of a successful tutor; teacher-tutor relationships; tutor-student relationships; tutor-institution relationships; the multidimensional role of the tutor; goals and objectives; critical thinking; awareness of learning processes; and successful interpersonal skills. Unit 2, "The Learning Process," covers the following topics: preparation, input, processing, storage, output, learning styles and modalities, blocks to successful learning, situational blocks, internal blocks, and learning skills and the nursing curriculum. Unit 3, "Keys to Successful Tutoring," includes information on holistic thinking; creating communication; organizing the tutoring session; diagnosing student problems; and strategies for when problems arise. The final unit offers "Practical Strategies for Nursing Tutors," focusing on language skills and nursing tasks; active reading strategies for mastering nursing texts; tutoring for writing; nursing math; and test-taking and study skills. (Contains 23 references.) (KP)

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EFFECTIVE TUTORING FOR NURSING:

A GUIDE FOR PEER TUTORS

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EFFECTIVE TUTORING FOR NURSING: A GUIDE FOR PEER TUTORS

Carla Jean Eardley

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FOREWORD: TO FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

EFFECTIVE TUTORING FOR NURSING: A GUIDE FOR PEER TUTORS is a complete self-study program for upper-level students in nursing and related professions who have been selected to work as peer tutors -- an essential learning support resource. Designed in response to a growing need for learning assistance materials targeted specifically to the special demands of nursing and related fields, EFFECTIVE TUTORING FOR NURSING prepares individuals for whom a complete tutor training program may not be feasible to work directly with students, in nursing and related programs, whose needs may not be met by general campus-wide tutoring services.

EFFECTIVE TUTORING FOR NURSING introduces essential concepts of tutoring as an aspect of learning assistance and explores the dimensions of the tutor's role from the holistic perspective taken by current learning theory and tutor training methodology.

Tutoring is an essential resource for students at risk of academic difficulty. For those students in nursing and related health professions, however, support directed at their particular needs have, until relatively recently, been rare. This guidebook for tutors represents one step toward filling that gap.

INTRODUCTION:

To The Tutor

INTRODUCTION: TO THE TUTOR

You've just become a tutor -- a very important part of your school's network of learning support services. As a tutor for your own nursing program, you have an essential role to play in bringing targeted, one-on-one learning support to nursing students whose specific problems and needs aren't being met by the general learning assistance services on your campus.

You may already have worked as a tutor, either privately or within a structured learning program. However, previous experience isn't really necessary. You don't already have to be familiar with concepts of education or psychology, either. And you certainly don't need lengthy, formal training to become an effective tutor -- just a willingness to study and the discipline to work on your own. This book is designed to prepare you to become a caring, competent resource for nursing students through independent study, without the structured group training offered by large, campus-wide tutoring programs.

EFFECTIVE TUTORING FOR NURSING lays the theoretical groundwork for an understanding of tutoring as a legitimate aspect of the larger field of learning assistance. It's important to note that this book does this within a *holistic* framework -- the basis for much of the work currently being done on learning and learning assistance. Taking the holistic perspective means viewing people, things and ideas not just in isolation, but as part of a larger context of mutually interrelated elements. In other words, to understand a situation or an individual, it's

necessary to take into account all the factors which contribute to its existence, and to see the relationships between these factors.

That means that in this book, you'll be exploring the task of tutoring on two distinct levels -- the level of *content*, which addresses the actual course material a student is having trouble with, and also the level of learning *process*, which deals with understanding the factors which contribute to the student's problem in managing the material. In order to do this, you'll be learning the strategies which help students to help themselves -- to become active learners who can apply the complex of skills which contribute to holistic thinking : *critical thinking*, *interactive reading*, and *responsive writing*. Finally, you'll integrate all these ideas into the nursing context as we examine specific strategies to help students improve their reading, writing, math and test-taking skills.

Your tutor supervisor or your department may structure your study plan, or work out a schedule with you. Or, you may find yourself left to do the work on your own within a loose timetable. Whatever the system, though, you'll need two things to get the most out of your tutor preparation: this book and a blank notebook.

Your notebook will be your tutor journal -- the place where you, in the absence of a teacher, keep a running record of your experiences and thoughts as a working tutor. Use it to work out the "One Step Further" questions at the end of each unit, and to work out problems and to evaluate yourself -- what works, what doesn't. The journal is really your classroom -- a tool for self-analysis and monitoring that takes the place

of teachers and peers. Use its pages to question, challenge, criticize or analyze -- all reflections of the active learning you'll be encouraging in the students you see for tutoring.

No one book can provide all the information you need. So once you've read this text, or while you're reading, try to locate at least a few of the materials listed in the RESOURCES section at the end of the book. Try to see how they fit in with what you've been reading, and what you've experienced in actual encounters with students. Explore these texts in your tutor journal. Expand your own knowledge and share what you've learned with others. As a tutor, you're an essential support for vulnerable students who may be able to stay in school and reach their goals thanks to your efforts. EFFECTIVE TUTORING FOR NURSING, and your tutor journal, provide the basics you need to step with confidence into this multidimensional and challenging role.

A note about English usage: In these days of nonsexist writing, it's become a little tricky to handle matters of the third person singular. The old grammatical standby "he" leaves out half the human race, while to use "she" exclusively in an attempt to restore the balance seems to reinforce the stereotype of nursing as a female profession. So , to acknowledge the fact that nursing students come in both sexes, and to avoid cumbersome constructions like "he or she" and "s/he", your text uses the plural when discussing students as a generic group, and alternates between masculine and feminine in examples that refer to just one individual.

UNIT ONE:

Orientation To Tutoring

UNIT ONE: ORIENTATION TO TUTORING

These days it seems as if anybody can tutor. Open any student newspaper, or skim the notices on campus bulletin boards, and chances are you'll see at least a few advertisements for private tutoring in subjects ranging from computers to Spanish. Volunteer tutors work in schools, libraries and church groups. Even elementary school students are encouraged to tutor their peers.

What does this explosion of tutoring services mean? Can just anyone hang out a shingle as a tutor? What does this increasing demand for tutoring on all levels of study imply about the nature of learning, the function of classroom instruction, and the nature of the support students need to succeed in their classes?

Recently, educators have come to realize that classroom instruction alone may not meet all the needs of all the students. In class, course content is pitched to the broadest possible spectrum, and so it can't be tailored to each individual student. One teacher can't always work intensively with each of thirty or so students in a fast-paced class, and accommodate the diverse learning styles of all these individuals. Or, textbooks and readings may be at a higher level than the student can handle. In other situations, a student may simply have a gap in the knowledge that's assumed to be a prerequisite for the class. Whatever the cause of the student's problem (and as we'll see, a part of the tutor's job is to find out), intensive and customized help may be impossible for the classroom teacher to provide.

Enter the tutor -- an individual with a good knowledge of the content area that's causing the difficulty, usually a student who's recently taken the classes to be tutored. For many less structured tutoring efforts, the session can consist of practically anything the tutor and tutee want it to be, from exam-cramming and rehearsing memorized material to rewriting a homework assignment. The overall effect of this array of miscellaneous activities is that of the old "Band-Aid" effect -- a quick fix for a superficial problem, which may bring the student back again and again as often as a new problem arises. In these situations, neither the student nor the tutor takes the opportunity to explore the other side of the tutoring function -- the interpersonal side that has the potential to empower students to manage their own learning problems and increase their self-confidence and ability to cope with any challenge to learning in any situation.

In the past few years, educators and learning specialists have begun to examine tutoring as a distinct skill area, with the same need for standards and qualifications as other kinds of teaching and student support. They've observed that in many cases, tutors don't have any training in the issues connected with the tutoring process itself; they pass on the knowledge they have by intuition, or by deliberately applying techniques they've absorbed from their own experiences as a student. Even in more formal academic settings, tutors are often hired on the strength of their grade point average in the subject they'll be tutoring, not on the basis of their ability to pass on that information to someone else. This suggests that one of the essential components of

a student's academic support system might be represented by a random array of activities, skills, techniques and philosophies, leaving students to take potluck when it comes to seeking help.

It's now believed that competence in the subject area is just one attribute of a successful tutor, and perhaps the most superficial one at that. Behind the subject knowledge lies a pool of concepts, skills and competencies that may have an even greater impact on the long-term success of a student seeking tutoring help. And to make sure tutors are able to draw on these competencies to deliver effective assistance to any student, current studies of tutoring as a professional learning assistance skill suggest that tutors need to prepare for their role by increasing their awareness of this extra dimension of tutoring.

In many situations, the tutor is the mainstay of students at risk for failure. The tutor can spot problems teachers miss, listen to concerns a student would never voice to the teacher, focus learning toward individual needs and problems, and see the student as a multidimensional individual instead of only a name or a face. The tutor can answer questions students are too shy to ask in class, and they can give personal, direct feedback on learning. The tutor can make the difference between failure and finish for a student ready to give up on the system.

With this kind of role to play, it's not surprising that so much effort is now being directed to preparing tutors for their work -- work on which students and teachers alike need to be able to depend. With all these functions in mind, a tutor can be viewed as an individual who's midway between teacher and student, working with both

sides to make sure students receive the support they need to succeed. Before we examine the scope of the tutor's role and the essential elements of good tutoring, let's take a look at the tutor's relationship to the other elements of the basic learning triangle - teacher and student.

TEACHER-TUTOR RELATIONSHIPS

Although a tutor's primary relationship is with the student seeking help, that student's regular classroom instructor is also a factor in the tutoring process. In private tutoring, the student's teacher is a distant figure who enters the picture only through the student's comments; tutors don't encounter the teacher face to face. Even tutors in large learning center labs don't usually work directly with their students' teachers. However, in program-specific tutoring situations, tutors know the faculty and can interact with them as needed to address student problems and issues.

When you became a tutor, you joined the learning support team. You and the teachers in your department are on the same side now, and you'll be relating to them in a more professional way than when you were a student in their classes. So take time to get reacquainted with the teachers in your department in your new capacity as a tutor.

Make every effort to let teachers know that you're responsible, reliable and committed to working with them to help students realize their dream of becoming nurses. Show them that you're capable of keeping confidentiality, that you'll offer responsible feedback and that you'll work with them to develop the best strategies to

deal with student problems. Teachers need to know that they can discuss a student's academic status freely with you, and that you'll put this information to positive use, rather than using the tutoring session as an occasion for gossip and teacher-bashing.

If you can, visit the teachers who teach the courses your tutees are taking. Even if you already have all the class materials from your own student days, ask to see the syllabus. Find out if any new texts or materials are being used, and examine them if you can. Try to arrange a time to chat with the teacher. Ask about areas that seem to be causing particular problems, and find out how the teacher presents this material. The context of learning is as important as the content -- and knowing as much as possible about the environment, attitudes and behaviors that accompany learning helps the tutor to take a holistic view of the student and the problem.

At the core of the learning triangle is of course the student-teacher relationship, one in which the tutor doesn't directly participate. However, the student (and in some cases the teacher too) may bring this relationship to the tutor. Students who are frustrated and angry over their difficulties may shift the responsibility to the instructor -- the person who's supposed to make learning happen: "She never answers our questions." Likewise, teachers can be frustrated too, or irritated by student attitudes and behaviors -- and they can communicate these feelings directly to you, the tutor.

Whatever the nature of the relationship between your students and their teachers, your job as tutor demands objectivity and detachment. Don't encourage negative feelings

on either side, and don't allow your tutoring sessions to degenerate into a forum for your student's anger at the system or the instructor. This isn't to say that your student's perceptions and beliefs aren't a valid subject for exploration -- you can certainly use them to develop a complete picture of the student's difficulty: does the student's attitude suggest a reluctance to take responsibility? Does it reflect reality in any way? However, once aired, these feelings need to take a back seat to the real purpose of the tutoring session -- solving a particular problem. Getting involved in teacher-student conflicts only reduces your effectiveness as a tutor and compromises your position as a learning support paraprofessional.

TUTOR-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Understanding and fostering the tutor-student relationship is the key to ensuring a successful tutoring experience for both parties. And that relationship begins with an awareness of the expectations, rights and responsibilities that both of you bring to the tutoring context.

Although students who tutor are often called peer tutors, it's important to remember that you and your student, by the nature of your respective roles, are not really peers. In the tutoring session, your role as tutor takes precedence over your role as fellow nursing student, and this change implies a definite "up-down" hierarchy in the relationship. For tutoring purposes, you're the authority figure, and thus you have the right to control and direct the tutoring process. This means that it's your job to keep things structured and professional, and that your recommendations and decisions carry real weight. Your student should understand that

while you're both connected in a friendly, personal relationship, you aren't just a couple of pals out for a study session.

Students who see the tutor as more accessible, more like themselves, and less intimidating than a teacher may be inclined to abuse the flexibility and informality that characterize the tutoring relationship. They may show up late, fail to do recommended preparation or followup work, or expect special accommodation, just because they don't see themselves as the junior member of the team. It's up to you to set the tone for a serious work session and keep the personal from overwhelming the professional.

You should be able to expect that your student will appear on time, ready to work and prepared with any relevant materials or questions. You have a right to expect cooperation from your student as you plan the tutoring activities, and honest effort toward working with you to solve problems. For their part, too, students have the right to expect that you'll be on time and prepared, that you'll let them know what they need to do to address their difficulties, and that you'll provide an honest assessment of their progress. Your students also have the right to expect that you'll keep personal matters confidential and respect their right to privacy -- and that you won't make juicy gossip out of the information that surfaces during a tutoring session. And both you and the students you see must be committed to working together to empower them to stand on their own two feet and take control of their own learning.

TUTOR-INSTITUTION RELATIONSHIPS

Your relationships with teachers and staff

members in your program are only one aspect of your connection to the larger academic world. As a tutor, you're also engaged in a relationship with the campus-wide student support system on your campus, and it's important to understand how you fit into this bigger context.

You're no doubt already familiar with the basic parts of this support system -- advising, financial aid, registration. But how much do you know about the more specialized student services offered on your campus? As a tutor, you'll need to become familiar with all your partners in the work of helping students to succeed.

Visit the campus learning center and browse through its resources. Find out what kind of tutoring is offered, and how it differs from the kind of work you'll be doing. See what's being done to improve students' reading, writing and study skills. Investigate the more specialized services too -- are there special vocational labs for practical math and computer skills? What about a writing center or special language workshops?

Also, explore the services which address the larger context of a student's life. Are there resources for disabled students? Child care for student moms? Counseling for emotional distress? How about job placement and career guidance?

Much as we'd all like to feel omnipotent, there will be occasions when your student's problems simply go beyond the realm of a tutor's expertise. A student in danger of failing a class may have reading skills so low that you can't even work with a nursing text -- you'll need to

know what remedial reading support is available. Another may confide that she's so discouraged over recent personal complications that she's thinking of suicide. Someone else may be skipping class because she can't find a sitter for her children. For students like these, with bigger problems than tutoring is designed to deal with, your best contribution may be a referral to resources equipped to handle the issue. Knowing how your tutoring activities relate to other resources on your campus enhances your effectiveness as a tutor by allowing you to concentrate on what you do best.

THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL ROLE OF THE TUTOR

Since so many aspects of student support fall under the general concept of tutoring -- intensive, focused support to improve an individual's ability to manage learning -- it's clear that the tutor's role goes far beyond that of just an answer machine.

If tutors aren't just walking encyclopedias with a smile, then what are they? You know that in nursing, an important factor for patient care is the ability to see individuals as part of their larger life context, full of dimensions beyond the one problem which brings them into your sphere. You need the ability to relate to people on multiple levels, adjusting your role as circumstances dictate: listener, comforter, health educator, diagnostician. Knowing which is which, and never losing sight of the fact that people are complex individuals acting within their own reality, is a key to becoming a mature, successful member of the nursing profession.

In many ways, the same concepts are valid for tutoring. Just as it's not enough for a nurse to know all the science and theory behind health care practices, it isn't enough for a tutor to have the highest grades in a class. What rounds out the competence of both individuals is a grounding in the "people" dimensions -- effective communication, positive, empowering interaction and empathy.

To understand how the tutor's role encompasses all these elements, it's useful to refer to a scheme developed by Gerald Jones (1984), who defines three essential hats for the

tutor to wear: *coach, counselor* and *commentator.*

Of course, a tutor is, first and foremost, a learning *coach,* and a coach is one who helps individuals acquire a practical mastery of a skill, not just abstract knowledge about it. You don't usually see a football coach standing behind a podium giving a lecture on how to win a game. He's right next to the players, following them in action, making corrections and adjusting strategies as the need arises. He doesn't just tell them how to move the ball; he's there with them as they do it. That analogy underscores the essential nature of tutoring -- an active, hands-on approach to learning that requires energy from both sides.

Counseling isn't just a job for the people in the academic advising office. The up-close and personal nature of tutoring creates a climate in which counseling often takes place. This function calls for the interpersonal skills which go beyond simply imparting concrete information. You'll be working to make your student feel confident and comfortable, and willing to risk being vulnerable in the session. Students may talk more freely to you than to a teacher, and you'll be hearing all the stories behind the grades -- the problems, wants and wishes that students carry through the day.

As a tutor, your counseling efforts will focus on the process of learning, over and above the subject content -- on helping students achieve an awareness of their own capacity to learn, and the confidence to apply that ability to solving learning problems independently. In many ways, these students may be very similar to hospital

patients -- frightened, feeling helpless and needing validation as a strong and capable individual. Your counseling function is directed toward dealing with these and other factors that interfere with learning.

Jones defines the third function of the tutor as that of *commentator* -- one who observes, evaluates and offers feedback on students' efforts. But there are more dimensions to this aspect of the tutor's role than Jones' definition suggests. Before a tutor can do any of these things effectively, it's essential to define what the student's difficulty really is, and where it comes from. To the commentator function we might add another -- that of *analyst*.

Successful tutoring within a holistic framework is partly detective work. A student may have a laundry list of perceived problems, or a teacher may have outlined what the difficulty appears to be. But it falls to the tutor to sort out all these diagnoses and integrate them into the information provided from direct observation and dialogue. A student who says she just can't read fast enough to keep up with the class may be trying to cram all the reading into an hour's bus ride to school. Likewise, the person whose paper is an incoherent mess may have spent all night at the hospital with a sick relative. The tutor needs to take all these and other factors into account when getting oriented to the student and the real problem.

More closely connected to the commentator aspect of tutoring, though, is the ability to offer feedback. As you and your student work to address both the content problem and the learning difficulties that contribute to it, you'll be constantly evaluating the student's ability to

apply what you've taught, and providing feedback that focuses on the positive outcomes while not ignoring or dismissing the negative ones. It's important to be honest, and not resort to blind cheerleading in an effort to build up the student's self-esteem. Although you won't be assigning formal grades, it's important to keep the student's efforts in perspective by discussing both the successful and unsuccessful strategies being applied, and by using negative comments as a springboard for moving on, not giving up.

Of course, in a given tutoring session, all the roles we've mentioned will blend and emerge as need. You can't just say, "Today I feel like counseling. I commented yesterday." Rather, you'll shift from one role to another as circumstances require. If a student comes in crying over a failed test, you may need to spend most of the session in counselor mode. But a student who arrives at the session with specific questions on a writing assignment may need only a coach. Having a clear understanding of the dimensions of the tutor's role allows you to call upon each one as needed, and to know when it's neede. We'll discuss these issues in more detail in Units Two and Three. Keep these essential roles tutors play in mind as we turn to the goals and objectives of tutoring itself.

TUTORING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Why should a tutor need to function on so many different levels? If the main point of tutoring is to solve a student's immediate problem, then what does the tutor need to be but a knowledgeable coach?

As we've seen, working with content --

imparting subject-specific knowledge targeted to a specific problem area -- is only half the function of effective tutoring. The other function has to do with the process of learning itself -- helping the student to become an active learner, whatever the subject area. To ignore this aspect of tutoring is to squander half its potential for helping students to become successful learners.

A student may spend a whole tutoring session reviewing medications and pass the test with an improved grade, thanks to the tutor's diligent drilling. But what then? The student moves on to the next class, runs into a similar problem, and ends up fleeing back to the tutor for another quick fix.

This might work until the student runs out of tutors and time. But if in the first place, the tutor had built into the session some efforts to attack the reasons behind this student's inability to study effectively for tests, the student might emerge from the tutoring session ready to manage not just the current situation, but also any similar ones which might arise in the future.

You might have heard the saying, "Give a man a fish, and you've fed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you've fed him for a lifetime." The same idea holds true in learning assistance -- successful learning support means eliminating the need for learning support. And the tutor who can address not just the surface problems that bring the student to tutoring, but also the conceptual framework that underlies them, has in effect fed the student for the duration of his or her academic life.

A sense of confidence and control affects performance. If you know that you have the

tools to handle a new task, then you can tackle it with anticipation rather than dread. The students who come to you for tutoring may well doubt their ability to learn, and feel helpless and inferior. The very fact of needing tutoring at all suggests an inability to cope with the basics. And as the student's sense of failure increases, so does the conviction that there's no hope and no point in trying. The student loses faith in his or her own judgement and ability -- a belief that has repercussions, like ripples from a stone tossed into a pond, for the larger context of life.

To sum up, then, the new view of tutoring, as it's understood by developers of learning assistance and tutor training programs, is that passing on factual knowledge is the first, but not the only, objective of tutoring. Beyond this lies a larger goal -- to help the student become an active and independent learner who can solve problems independently. The tutor who can combine competence in the subject area -- the **content** -- with an awareness of the interpersonal skills that center on helping a student to manipulate the process of learning itself is a truly effective learning resource.

THE TUTOR'S SKILL COMPLEX

As we've noted, successful nursing isn't just a matter of having a superior knowledge of medications, anatomy and biology -- although that knowledge serves as the foundation on which other skills can be built. In addition to this theoretical grounding in nursing process, a successful nurse needs to think holistically, reason logically, make decisions responsibly and communicate effectively. And tutors need to be able to call on these very skills as well. With that

point in mind, we'll now turn to a discussion of each of the skill areas that contribute to success in nursing and, by extension, in tutoring. We'll assume content knowledge is a given; now and throughout the rest of this book, we'll explore ways to link your content knowledge to the wider field of learning process skills that form the foundation for successful tutoring:

Critical thinking. This umbrella concept covers a wide range of cognitive patterns and learning strategies that contribute to successful learning. Since one goal of tutoring is to help students to think independently and solve problems, it follows that you'll need to be able to understand and draw on these skills yourself.

Crticial thinking skills include problem-solving, analyzing, synthesizing information from different sources, seeing relationships among discrete and diverse facts, and linking situations and information to a larger context -- seeing the big picture, or thinking holisitically. Critical thinking is an essential component of active learning -- interacting with a situation to extract information, rather than passively receiving it.

The ability to think holistically -- to see beyond the immediate issue to its larger implications, to see all the sides of a problem or a situation, not just one, and to apply new knowledge to a familiar situation -- is an ability which students in need of learning assistance seem to lack. Since you're a successful nursing student, you're probably intuitively applying these skills in your own studies. But now your job is to develop those skills in someone else. So you'll need to become more aware of your own thinking strategies and the ways in which you apply

critical thinking in your own academic and personal life, and then to consider how to impart that skill ot your student.

Awareness of the learning process. Your ability to develop active learning strategies in your students is greatly enhanced by your own awareness of how learning works -- how people acquire and process knowledge. A tutor who's familiar with the essentials of the learning process can help students pinpoint their own blocks and problem spots and develop strategies that will conquer them. This kind of metalearning -- learning about learning -- is the first step toward taking control of one's own studies. We'll examine these concepts in more detail in Unit Two.

Successful interpersonal skills. Communicating effectively and appropriately for the context is a key factor in increasing a tutor's competence in all facets of tutoring -- coaching, counseling and commenting. This, of course, includes the ability to synthesize and impart information relevant to the student's problem. But beyond that, a successful tutor needs to be able to draw on a wide range of communication strategies to manage the session, sustain a comfortable and productive relationship with the student, and relate professionally and effectively to the larger academic world. We'll discuss these issues in detail in Unit Three.

Above all, the most successful tutors seem to be those who care most about students and their problems. Nursing is founded on compassion and caring; the profession attracts people who aren't afraid to commit themselves to helping others. The very nature of your chosen field creates an

atmosphere for good tutoring. In the following units we'll build on this foundation.

ONE STEP FURTHER

Use your tutor journal to work through at least two of the questions below, as you practice applying some of the essential concepts in this chapter.

1. What can a tutor do to appear professional and responsible? Why is it important for a tutor to have the confidence of both teachers and students?

2. Why does a tutor need to be familiar with campus wide learning support services? Describe one service on your campus, and discuss ways in which it relates to your work in the nursing department.

3. What are the three roles of a tutor? Why does the tutor need to be able to fill all these roles?

4. We've said that a tutor's competence in the subject area is only half the story. Why is this so? What's the other function of the tutor, and why is it so important?

5. What is holistic thinking? Why does a tutor need to know about it?

UNIT TWO:

The Learning Process

UNIT TWO: THE LEARNING PROCESS

How do people learn? The process by which we "own" information -- assimilate it and make it a part of our larger store of knowledge to use as needed -- has been explored by researchers in fields as diverse as education, psychology, neurology and linguistics. Individual learning strategies and styles are as varied as the learners themselves. Nevertheless, it's possible to posit a basic model of learning that's common to general human thought patterns. Those who are engaged in the work of helping people learn can benefit from a basic understanding of the learning process, its variations and the ways in which it can be affected by a myriad of factors, both major and minor.

To give tutors a working knowledge of the learning process, Ronald Schmeizer, William Brozo and Norman Stahl (1985) have developed a simple learning model based on the way in which computers process information. Although human learning is an infinitely sophisticated and complex process, it's nevertheless possible to separate this process into five basic stages: *Preparation, Input, Processing, Storage and Output.*

Preparation. In the preparation stage, an individual creates the environment in which learning can be accomplished. This includes all the steps which lead to the actual activity of acquiring information -- setting up a study schedule, gathering all necessary materials, and even making sure to get enough rest and food before sitting down to study. Preparation activities are of course highly idiosyncratic. But the essential function of this stage of the

learning process is to eliminate distractions, increase comfort, and ensure that all conditions are conducive to meeting the individual's own learning needs. When the preparation stage is flawed -- materials aren't organized, the student tries to cram everything in on the night before a test or lives on coffee and candy bars to meet a deadline for a paper -- other stages of the learning process are affected in a kind of domino effect. The preparation stage lays the groundwork for all that follows.

Input. Just as a computer needs programs to run, a learner needs to find the appropriate ways to introduce information into the mental storehouse. For the purposes of learning theory, the input stage involves all the activities and processes that make sure that the information that's been acquired is made meaningful and usable: reading, study skills, memorization, synthesis. If a student has problems with reading the standard nursing text, for example, that information can't be converted into usable knowledge. Likewise, deficient study skills -- problems deciding what's important to study, organizing notes, or allotting quality time for studying -- will impede the successful inputting of information. Input is directly related to preparation -- how well a student is able to take in information depends on how successfully the stage was set for studying in the first place.

Processing. This stage of the learning process includes all the processes that make the material which has been learned available for practical use. At this point, learners consider how the material will be applied, and adjust their learning strategies accordingly. Does the new information relate to things the learner already knows? Or is

it completely unconnected to anything else in the learning storehouse? The learner needs to be able to decide if all that's needed is a quick skim of the material, because it's already familiar, or if it's necessary to read closely and carefully with numerous notes, because this is new information.

Similarly, processing can include such strategies as making written notes versus just listening, or repeating information aloud for extra emphasis -- anything that helps make the information a permanent part of the learner's store of knowledge. Students may not be aware that different processing skills need to be applied in different situations, depending on the nature of the material to be learned, and the academic needs of the moment. They may not realize, for example, that the processing strategies that work very well in American History aren't always useful in Pharmacology.

Storage. This step relates to strategies for retaining the information which has been processed. Techniques for memorizing facts, dates and formulae, and for synthesizing material and relating bits of information to preexisting knowledge so that they can be retrieved at need are all essential to keeping the learned material available for use. Storage strategies might include mnemonics, listing, note-taking, oral repetition, self-testing, making note cards or being quizzed by a friend. A student with problems storing information may not be able to focus on memorizing, or to see the differences between similar facts.

Output. What goes in must come out. Input of information in the world of learning means output in the form of tests, reports, assignments

or other demonstrations that the student has successfully negotiated the first four stages defined in the learning model. Every student knows the indications of failure in the output stage -- the blankness while staring at a test question, the skimpy, garbled research paper, the confusion over what the teacher really wants on the assignment. Producing acceptable evidence that learning has taken place is a skill in itself, as all the guides for improving test-taking skills and writing good research papers attest.

While the steps in the learning process are connected (Schmelzer and company call it an "integrated model"), it's possible to have a failure in only one or two, while getting by in the others. Locating the stage at which a failure has occurred and finding ways to address it are important tasks for you as a tutor.

Schmelzer's model is by no means the only one proposed to explain human learning. But for the purposes of providing a quick and simple orientation to the learning process, it covers the broad essentials thought to form the basis for the varied ways in which people acquire new information. In other words, we all follow the same steps when we set out to introduce new material into our mental storehouse, but each of us puts our unique personal stamp on the process.

LEARNING STYLES AND MODALITIES

Educators and others working with learning theory have spent a great deal of effort trying to crack the riddle of the variety in learning experiences -- to understand why, if Student A and Student B are instructed in precisely the

same way, and given precisely the same information, Student A masters the material and Student B does not. If everyone applies the same steps to learning new information, both students ought to have the same outcome. But research suggests that while we may all follow the same sequence of events in acquiring knowledge, our ultimate success or failure depends on a complex interaction of contextual factors, both internal and external. Becoming aware of these factors -- seeing learning holistically -- can help you target your tutoring strategies to the needs of each student you encounter.

You may know somebody who can only study with loud music blaring through headphones that can barely contain the noise, or someone who memorizes tables and formulae while pacing the floor. There are people who can't solve a single equation, but who compose beautiful poems. Some students may not undestand a word the textbook has to say on a concept, but grasp it immediately when the teacher summarizes it in a lecture. And then there are people who just can't cope with abstractions at all -- they need to touch things, feel them, and smell them in order to understand them.

In the last decade or so, research on a number of different fronts has uncovered a number of surprising facts which shed light on how and why humans learn as they do. One promising area of interest has to do with the organization of the human brain itself.

It's now well-known that each hemisphere of the brain has its own capacities or functions, and ways of processing information. We can sum up these discoveries briefly as follows: the left brain, traditionally considered dominant because

it controls language, also handles math, logic and linear, step-by-step thinking. This is the area of rationality, analysis and time awareness. Left-brain processing allows us to say, "One plus one equals two", understand that an oval with a dot represents a human eye, decipher a timetable and get to class on time.

The right hemisphere, long thought to be a mute dependent of the left, is now known to have its own capacity for handling input. This is the arena of intuition, subjective insight, holistic processing and understanding abstraction and metaphor -- just "knowing" without working through a logical step-by-step sequence. Right brain functioning allows us to dream, see connections between unrelated items, to create music and poems, to experience sudden insights.

It's clear that these discoveries about brain functions have a profound impact on understanding how people learn. In some individuals, the left-brain mode dominates; in others, the right. And it's now known that still others show a mixture of right and left brain features in their way of relating to the world. Clearly, then, each individual will approach learning from this inherent orientation, and develop strategies to accommodate it as far as possible in any learning situation.

To account for, among other things, the way individuals compensate for their hemisphere dominance in learning, Howard Gardner and others have posited from seven to twelve different learning styles, or "intelligences" which influence how people process information. Although each of the systems proposed by Gardner and his fellow scholars differ in the finer

points, they're based on the same essential distinctions: visual learning, oral/aural learning, and tactile/kinesthetic learning. Visual learners need to see information; they extract material from written sources most effectively. Charts, pictures and diagrams may be essential for these individuals. Oral-aural learners may respond best to rhythm and repetition, understand best from a lecture rather than from a textbook, and talk through concepts in order to master them. Learners with a tactile/kinesthetic orientation may prefer to work with three-dimensional materials, move while studying, and compose papers while cooking or pulling weeds in a garden.

More learning styles may await discovery, but you don't need to wait for an exhaustive list in order to be aware that one reason for a student's learning problem may be a mismatch between the way the information is being presented and the student's processing style.

Mismatches in input and processing are common in education at all levels -- not surprising, when we consider the traditional model of teaching and learning in American schools from kindergarten to college. In this model, teaching proceeds with linear directness through a set curriculum that may not acknowledge any relationship to other subjects being taught. Teachers lecture, students read and sit quietly and wait for instructions on what to do next. Teachers are authority figures who dispense knowledge, students the ignorant who passively receive it.

Although this traditional model is changing somewhat today in response to new discoveries about learning, it still has set the standard for

our conception of the "normal" educational experience -- a standard that leaves little or no room for variation in learning style and orientation, and sets up conditions for the most global of learning blocks -- passive learning. We'll address this in more detail, below, in our discussion of types of learning blocks.

BLOCKS TO SUCCESSFUL LEARNING

So far, we've been building a basic framework about learning theory into which we can place the specifics which will affect your work as a tutor for nursing. Now it's time to turn to the factors which cause the system to break down -- those variables, both internal and external, which interfere with an individual's efforts to successfully acquire and utilize information. These are the learning blocks -- the passivity, situational blocks and the complex of beliefs and attitudes which impede the successful processing of information.

Passive Learning -- A Global Block

As we've observed, our standard model of education -- teacher dispenses knowledge, student receives it and then repeats it to the teacher's satisfaction -- encourages students to play the passive role, looking to teachers, texts and other authorities for received knowledge in a specific subject area, which isn't demonstrated to have any connection to other subjects being studied in other classes.

This passive orientation encourages unquestioning acceptance of information received. After all, it comes from the experts and the authorities in the form of texts, readings and

lectures. All the answers must be there; it never occurs to the passive learner to look beyond those sources, or to pose questions that they don't address.

Students who rely almost exclusively on received knowledge have little capacity for active, critical learning: the complex of holistic learning skills that support making effective use of information received. These passive learners may be stymied when confronted with problem-solving tasks, or asked to transfer knowledge from one area to another, such as using strategies learned in English class to write a paper for Psychology. Passive learners may have problems seeing beyond the immediate assignment to the larger context to which it's connected -- for example, linking today's homework assignment with next week's midterm, for example.

Likewise, passive learners are often dismayed and confused when a test or other class activity is based on material learned in a previous class, or even a previous chapter in the textbook: "She said the test was going to be over chapter twelve -- but there was stuff on it from chapter three!" These students may demand to know precisely -- no ambiguity allowed! -- what they need to study for a test, right down to the page numbers, or exactly what they have to do to pass the class. For them, there's no room for variation. and teachers who don't spell it all out are labeled indifferent to the student's welfare.

Passivity leads to difficulty in all stages of the learning process. In **preparation**, where the student should be developing a game plan for attacking the material to be learned, passive

learners wait for the teacher or syllabus to tell them what to do -- precisely how much energy to expend, and in what direction. Likewise, in the input stage, these learners may not realize that they have to make choices about how to deal with the material -- analyzing its relevance, assigning it a place in the information storehouse, testing it against previous knowledge -- in order to make it useful and accessible. Again, they wait for some mysterious process to occur while they stuff their heads with facts and details.

Processing is also a problem for the passive learner, since it requires the learner to match strategy to goals in an effort to make the material usable. Students may not realize that one learning strategy doesn't work for all tasks. For some students, studying in any subject area just means memorizing a lot of facts. If they're confronted with a situation in which this just doesn't work, they're at a loss. They can't figure out what's wrong, much less do anything to solve the problem.

Storage of new information may pose less of a problem for the passive. Storage is reception, and that's how passive learners take in information. But if they're blocked in any of the other stages of learning, they may not have stored the relevant material or they may have stored it in an unusable form: a list of medication names, for example, without any attention to the use and contraindications of these drugs.

The passive student's problems with the output of the material which has been learned are obvious. Since the passive student relies mainly on the explicit information and instructions from

outside, without attempting to think beyond it to the larger context, difficulties arise when test questions don't precisely reflect the textbook material or the teacher's lectures. Likewise, any essay or report assignment that doesn't spell out exactly what's expected can cause the passive learner to run into trouble -- such a learner isn't conditioned to go beyond just finding and repeating facts. This kind of learner may simply satisfy the literal requirements of the assignment -- but be unable to go beyond it, or even understand the need to do so.

Since passive learners take their cues from the academic experts, they aren't inclined to think of learning as an interactive process -- one that can be manipulated and adapted to suit the needs of the moment. This concept is also largely overlooked in our traditonal model of education. Students and teachers both take learning as a given: all that's needed is to make information available and students should automatically know what to do -- memorize it and reproduce it on tests and other kinds of assignments.

Students who aren't familiar with their own learning abilities may struggle through college, trying to apply the same skills they absorbed through osmosis in elementary school. They don't see that different tasks require different skill applications, and may think that reading a nursing fundamentals text is the same as reading a fashion magazine. And if they encounter a problem with a class, they may blame the teacher, for not giving them everything they need to pass the class.

Since, as we've observed, active learning -- taking control of the process and interacting with

texts and assignments instead of passively receiving material -- is a cornerstone of nursing success, the student who's working from the passive position may be blocked on all fronts. All too often, this kind of block is compounded by a variety of others, both internal to the student and imposed by outside circumstances. The implications of passive learning go beyond the classroom, and follow the student right into the hospitals and clinics, where, although it's certainly desirable to follow orders and take instruction on what to do, nurses are expected to demonstrate initiative and personal responsibility as circumstances dictate. In the American context, nurses are active members of the health care team, and making a habit of passively waiting for someone else's directions may cost a life.

Externals: Situational blocks to learning

Sometimes a block against efficient learning may be as simple as an environmental or personal factor -- someone who's trying to cram in a full course load of studying late at night, after the kids are asleep, and on top of a day's work is going to be tired, distracted and pressured, and these factors will undermine even the most determined preparation for learning. Likewise, if a student is faced with a crisis outside the classroom, all available energy will go to dealing with the situation -- not to studying, however diligent the student may be.

For some students, this kind of situational learning block clears up on its own, once the circumstances causing it are resolved. But in other cases, the problem sets the student back sufficiently that he just can't catch up, and if the student has been barely getting by with

underdeveloped learning skills in the first place, this combination of factors can reach a crisis state in a very short time. It's important, then, to focus on developing short-term strategies to solve the immediate difficulty and then to emphasize ways to recover from it -- developing more efficent study strategies, for example, or skimming backlogged readings for main ideas just to catch up with the class.

An individual's background and environment may also interfere with learning. A student who's spent early school years just getting by in understaffed and underfunded classes which provide just the minimum to graduate may not really be psychologically prepared for the rigors of a professional preparation program. Likewise, a student who sailed through class after class without being challenged may not have had to study intensively and face lower grades. And for some students, the culture of education just isn't one they've grown up with. If few family members have ever gone farther than the minimum required education, such students may not realize the unwritten rules about classroom interaction and school procedure that others have been picking up since kindergarten.

In some communities and families, too, there may even be a negative attitude toward higher education; a student trying to get through might encounter sneers and criticism for "selling out" or not getting a "real" job -- all factors which interfere with learning. And too, some people may have had bad experiences in school in the past -- a critical teacher, mocking classmates, or failures that haunt all their later endeavors: a student told at the age of eight that she really isn't good in math may still freeze up on nursing

math tests decades later.

Other hidden blocks may have to do with culture and language. In some cultures, passive learning -- the very learning style we've identified as a real block to successful nursing study -- is valued as the most appropriate behavior in the classroom. Students from these cultures are taught that the teacher is the ultimate authority on learning, and to ask questions is to imply that the teacher is not competent. Likewise, a proper attitude for learning is to wait respectfully for a teacher to provide answers; it's the teacher's responsibility to make sure the students don't fail.

In connection with this, some cultures discourage individual expression or standing out from the crowd -- the Japanese say, "the nail that sticks up gets pounded down." Students from these cultures are reluctant to seek help, or make independent decisions; they need group consensus to act, and think it's unseemly to take the initiative -- all beliefs which clash directly with the active, independent learning orientation that American nursing requires. This kind of barrier to successful learning -- in the American context -- may persist just because the student and teachers too aren't really aware of these deeply different expectations about learning -- a situation that a tutor may be able to remedy, just by discussing the assumptions held by both sides.

Along with culture, limited language skills may form a block to success in American nursing programs. A foreign-born student's fluency in spoken English may hide a serious weakness in the higher-order vocabulary required for reading nursing and science texts, or in the more

sophisticated grammar needed for writing reports and papers. A problem with nursing math, for example, may have less to do with math itself than with the word-problem style in which the problem is presented. And a student's statement that it's hard to find the main ideas in reading may hide the fact that the unfamiliar vocabulary makes it hard to get past words and into meaning.

However, it isn't just the non-native English speakers who might have a language block to learning. For native speakers who've been raised using a substandard dialect, or whose parents speak a different language, many of the same considerations apply -- there's a functioning use of language for daily activities, but a limited grasp of the more sophisticated structures and vocabulary needed for academic reading and writing.

Students -- foreign-born and native alike -- may not be aware of the different levels of language needed for different tasks, and teachers may not be aware that these students need to be told. Whatever the source of the language problem, tutors need to keep in mind that students may be reluctant to acknowledge that they have language-related problems. Non-native speakers don't want to be singled out from their native speaker classmates for special attention, and native speakers with skill deficits may feel uncomfortable admitting that they have problems with their own language.

There may be organic blocks to learning too -- some students have learning disabilities which cause significant problems in reading and studying. Dyslexia is the best known of these.

Students may not even know if they have a disability of this kind; learning disabilities may go undetected throughout a student's entire academic career, with the resulting low grades blamed on a variety of other factors. If you suspect an organic learning disability -- the student's problems don't respond to any of your strategies -- discuss the matter with the student's instructor, and be prepared to refer the student to appropriate campus resources for further help. Don't try to solve the matter yourself. Remember too that vision and hearing disabilities can also interfere with learning.

Internal Blocks to Learning -- Beliefs and Behaviors

In many cases, a student's blocks to learning are psychological in origin -- either alone or in combination with (or fostered by) external factors like the ones discussed above. This is the kind of learning block for which your counseling and communication skills, applied through sensitive, non-judgmental tutoring, can make a real difference. A student who's convinced that she's a failure, who doesn't believe that she'll ever be good enough, smart enough, competent enough, to be a nurse, feels powerless to do anything right. If this student approaches studying with the belief that nothing she does can help the situation, there's no incentive to take an active role in learning, and the student falls farther and farther behind. The sense of failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy unless the cycle of low self-esteem and poor performance is broken.

Other kinds of beliefs can also undermine academic success. A good student may be so sensitive to criticism that he chokes when faced

with any kind of evaluation, no matter how thoroughly he's prepared for the event. This results in low grades and a corresponding loss of self-confidence. Yet another student may be under enormous outside pressures from family or other sources to succeed, and so feels so tense and nervous that studying becomes impossible. Some students, too, far from being anxious to succeed, actually have a negative outlook, resenting the instructor's critical comments and refusing to take directions -- a set of circumstances which result in poor grades and a lot of anger which can impede learning.

Still other variations on this theme might include the conviction that a teacher dislikes the student, or is biased against the student's ethnic or cultural background, or even that the program itself is faulty -- a good way to avoid personal responsibility for academic difficulties. Whatever the case, the learning block here stems from the student's own perceptions and not from external factors -- although the block is really a complex of elements which contribute to a global sense of frustration and inadequacy. If outside factors are overwhelming, students with a few marginal grades may well view instructors as hostile and uncooperative, or believe that prejudice blocks the route to a nursing degree.

As you orient yourself to students and their problems in the early stages of your tutoring relationships, listen for statements that suggest the student is being blocked by self-defeating beliefs: "I'm just no good with figures." "I've never been able to handle writing." "They don't care about ESL students here." Point out (if you can) evidence to the contrary. Helping your student break a psychological learning block may

be of more lasting value than the information you impart -- and it's the kind of help that a tutor is ideally suited to give.

Blocks to learning are as varied as the students who have them. We haven't presented an exhaustive list, but rather a survey of the most likely sources for learning blocks, both external and internal. While your job as a tutor shouldn't involve any serious attempts to resolve major troublespots, just knowing what kind of baggage your student is bringing to the tutoring session can increase your potential to make a difference.

LEARNING SKILLS AND THE NURSING CURRICULUM

Up to now, we've been discussing general issues affecting successful learning whatever the subject area and circumstances, with a few tangential references to nursing-specific situations. Now we'll take a closer look at how the special demands of nursing and health programs create obstacles for students.

Nursing as a discipline is very different in some ways from the general academic curriculum in place at most schools. We've seen how the "traditional" model of education can undermine student success. Much of the standard college curriculum is modeled on the passive orientation that allows students to receive knowledge and to reproduce it on tests, so that they can pitch their efforts precisely toward meeting the requirements of one class without being too concerned about the repercussions for other classes they might take. Seeing a "big picture" that integrates all study areas into one broad educational context isn't really a pressing

concern when you just have to pass algebra this semester.

In this kind of environment, students may take the short-term outlook -- "what do I have to do, right now, to get through this class? " -- rather than the long view -- "what do I need to be able to do when I'm on a hospital floor?" -- without much damage to their chances for long-term success in their chosen field. Active learners may get more out of their college experience, but passive learners can negotiate the system too, though they might find that their post-college work experience puts more emphasis on self-reliance, decision-making and problem solving skills than they'd expected.

Today, efforts are being made to introduce teaching methods and activities which encourage precisely the kind of active learning and thinking skills which students need to succeed beyond the world of school. Even so, many students fresh (and not so fresh) out of the standard college curriculum find themselves unprepared for the active learning which nursing requires. These students aren't able to transfer skills they've already acquired to a new context, and they have difficulty seeing the larger whole behind the smaller units of assignments, tests and courses. Similarly, they may not be aware of the "unwritten rules" of the world of education -- the assumptions about study skills and classroom conventions that teachers expect all students to share.

For many students, too, nursing represents an investment of emotion and self-image which other study programs may not. It may be difficult to feel noble about a career in accounting; but how many people are drawn to

the image of nurse as caregiver and comforter? It's this picture of the future self that some students carry with them into their nursing program -- a picture that may gloss over the reality of the studying and discipline that it takes to get there: "Why do I need to memorize all these terms? All I want to do is take care of patients."

Today, too, many nursing students don't fit the traditional picture of a high-school graduate who has few commitments other than getting an education. These modern nursing students may be older than average, single parents, or even retired from some other field. For them, nursing is a second chance, maybe even a shot at a long-deferred dream. They've made sacrifices to attend school, and the pressures and investment of self are great. These "non-traditional" students may well bring to nursing a sense of responsibility and commitment that younger students might not have, but they're also vulnerable to problems that arise from larger life considerations, educational background and psychological factors.

These students may have been out of school for years, with skills which are rusty, or lacking altogether for dealing with the demands of the current academic world. Or, pressured by family and economic considerations on top of school, they may have problems with setting priorities and giving their nursing studies the needed attention.

Whatever the student profile, though, active learning -- that complex of skills so essential for success in nursing (as well, of course, as other disciplines) -- is a faculty that some individuals

just don't have. In order to take active control of their own academic destiny, they can use your help to develop an awareness of their own capacity for learning, with its attendant strengths and weaknesses, and to acquire the strategies to cope with any challenges they might encounter.

ONE STEP FURTHER

As before, select two or more of the questions below for further exploration in your tutor journal.

1. What kind of learner are you -- right brain dominant, left brain dominant -- or are you a little of each? What makes you think so? Consider some of your own learning experiences -- the easiest and the most difficult -- for insights.

2. What kind of learner is most at home in the "traditional" classroom? Why? What kind of learner might have more difficulty learning in this situation?

3. Why is the preparation stage of learning so important? What kind of preparation might be appropriate for a visual learner? A tactile/kinesthetic learner?

4. What is passive learning and why does it pose a serious problem for nursing students?

5. Why is nursing education different from the standard academic curriculum? What special demands does it place on students?

6. Learning blocks can be both internal and external (situational) -- or both. Give an example

of each. How do these blocks differ? What can you as a tutor do to help a student deal with an internal block? With an external block?

UNIT THREE:

Keys To Successful Tutoring

UNIT THREE: KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL TUTORING

A successful tutoring session leaves both tutor and tutee feeling satisfied that goals have been met and learning has taken place. In this unit we'll look at the components of an effective tutoring session, and provide some guidelines for establishing a good working relationship with your tutees.

What makes a successful tutoring session? Of course, that all depends on the reasons your student has for seeking tutoring in the first place. But based on the principles we've been examining in the previous two chapters, we can say that tutoring is a success when it meets a student's needs on two levels: the *process* of learning, and the *content* of the subject being studied. Your tutoring session is most effective when:

--The student is honored as an individual, a complete person acting within his or her own life context. Just as you wouldn't think of a person lying in a hospital bed as just a "gall bladder" or a "liver", it doesn't do to think of your student as "the math problem" or "the woman who can't calculate dosages." The problem, as we've seen, can't really be separated from the larger context of the individual's experience. Helping students to develop an awareness of these relationships is a step toward empowering them to manage their own learning.

-- The student receives information and strategies to solve the present problems and to deal independently with similar situations in other contexts. This is, as we've seen, the

central function of tutoring, and it applies on the two levels of *content* and *process* -- the student needs not just the answer to the present problem, but also an understanding of his or her own learning style and an opportunity to develop skills to meet future needs.

-- The student demonstrates the capability to apply the new information and strategies as needed. Tutoring isn't just a matter of presenting the necessary material -- the student needs room for practice, mistakes and trial and error on the way to completely mastering that material. This means that the tutor has to be patient while the student works toward owning the new strategies and skills.

Of course, all tutoring sessions aren't alike. And as you develop an ongoing relationship with a student, your meetings will become flexible; you won't have to consciously check yourself to see whether the session has included all the necessary components or whether you've done all the recommended things. Still, these basic elements of a successful tutoring session do rest on three essential concepts which apply to both you and your student: **Holistic thinking, Dialogue** and **Structure.** Let's take a detailed look at each of these, and see how they relate to making your tutoring session a success.

HOLISTIC THINKING

As we've seen, one of the foundations of active learning is the ability to interact with input, rather than just receiving it. And the key to doing this is *holistic thinking* -- looking beyond the individual pieces of the puzzle to see the big picture formed by all the pieces, linked together.

Holistic thinking is connecting today's news headline about saturated fat intake with last year's study on the contributing factors in cardiovascular disease, and relating all this information to decisions you make about your own diet and health. It's seeing why a trade agreement with a distant land might affect what kinds of products you'll buy at home next year.

Holistic thinking is relating the pharmacology class you're taking now to the chemistry class you took a year ago, and both of them to the pediatrics class you'll take next semester. And on top of that, relating them all plus your other courses to the overall design of the nursing program and your own goals as a nurse. It's seeing how the assignment you do today fits in with the plan of the course, and how the reading you did for yesterday's test will help you in an emergency room a year from now.

You've probably already become familiar with holistic thinking to some degree, since you're a successful student in a discipline which demands that you be able to synthesize and apply information from a broad knowledge base to specific situations and to look at a patient as a whole person: to take in all available information on that individual's symptoms and history, to weigh all the possible implications of that information as well as available options for care, in order to get a satisfactory outcome.

You may have heard it said that someone "can't see the forest for the trees." This old saying is a succinct summation of the value of holistic thinking : the person in question concentrates so intently on each individual, small item as to be unable to get an overview of all the elements working together -- to see the big picture. It's

that inability to look to the larger context that limits the individual's capacity to manipulate information to the best advantage; in other words, to think critically about information and apply it when appropriate.

The ability to bring together different sources of information, combine them into a greater whole, and then draw on them as needed is the foundation of academic writing, experienced by most students in the form of research papers. But these thinking skills of synthesis and analysis are essential for reading and studying too, where students need to draw together all available information on a topic and see what relationships exist among these different sources.

This entire complex of skills creates the basis for active learning -- skills which academically disadvantaged students may need help to develop. And the more you develop your own holistic thinking faculties, and practice relating, analyzing and synthesizing information, the better equipped you'll be to develop these capabilities in the students who come to you for tutoring -- students who are so busy scrutinizing the "trees" of individual assignments and tests that they forget about the "forest" of the nursing profession itself.

DIALOGUE: CREATING COMMUNICATION

Successful tutoring rests on communicating effectively from both sides: on creating a dialogue between you and the student that isn't tipped too heavily in favor of either of you. A tutoring session shouldn't become just a lecture hour, in which you show off your superior

knowledge of the subject. Likewise, it shouldn't be just a therapy session for your student, who needs a forum for airing gripes and fears. This isn't to say that either of these activities is inherently bad or inappropriate in a tutoring session -- the student needs to feel safe about discussing problems, fears and feelings, and you do need to be able to impart information. However, it shouldn't end up one-sided. And it falls to you, the tutoring pro, to develop and apply the communication skills needed to manage the session and keep it productive and on track.

Dialogue implies give and take -- question and response, over and over again. Everyone knows that questioning is an active process, but what about listening? Being an active listener, and teaching students how to do the same, can actually contribute as much to creating effective dialogue as talking can.

Really listening to what people say is an art. Often we're too caught up in what we're going to say next, or even hoping we'll hear what we want to hear, to really process what somebody is trying to tell us. If you have an agenda running in your head -- "10:30 already and we're supposed to be going over Chapter Six, she never comes to the session on time, and when will I get to eat lunch?" -- you may not really hear the student telling you that she was late because her mother's in the hospital and she had to work an extra shift last night to make up the time spent in the emergency room, and she's so tired today that she doesn't remember what she read. This sets up conditions for both of you to end up frustrated -- you, irritated with a student you're convinced doesn't care enough to come prepared and on time, and she, angry that you don't care about her problems and aren't really interested in

helping her cope.

Connected with not hearing what people are telling you is putting your own spin on it when you do hear it, or disregarding it completely because it doesn't fit into your own frame of reference. This can be a problem among authority figures of all kinds -- doctors who aren't interested in hearing a patient's input about an illness, teachers who resent being challenged or questioned by a student, therapists who dismiss a client's concerns as just demands for attention. Tutors can fall into this trap too -- taking the "one-up" professional role so seriously that they don't think students have anything valuable to say.

The keys to active listening are *feedback and response* -- verifying that the message received really does equal the message sent. In other words, it's important to reassure the speaker that his idea connected with you. This kind of feedback can take many forms -- a comment on the speaker's last statement, a question for more information, an exclamation, a challenge. Sometimes the most effective feedback can be just a comprehension check -- anything which lets the student know whether or not you did get the right message. If a student tells you, "I just can't seem to get dosages right," you can confirm what's being said by saying, "You're having a hard time calculating dosages correctly." Then the student can acknowledge that you've understood the message, or let you know that you misunderstood in some way.

Tutor feedback is essential to a student's progress. The tutor's comments can build or destroy a student's fragile self-confidence.

While it's certainly important to shore up a vulnerable ego, keeping all feedback positive is hardly useful, and certainly unrealistic. You need to be able to give an honest and objective assessment of students' progress without defeating them and confirming their own worst beliefs about their abilities. This kind of objective input can also mean challenging beliefs and self-sabotaging behaviors in a nonthreatening way: "You said you were no good in math. But you just solved all these problems correctly." "You told me you were really worried about doing your paper. But you haven't even begun to make an outline."

It's important to keep feedback real and relevant. Don't fall back on hollow, and sometimes unwittingly belittling statements like "That's easy -- anybody can do it!", "That's fourth grade math -- you can handle it", or "You'll do fine on the test." Point instead to real things the student has accomplished: "You did six problems without a mistake." "You found the main points in all the readings today." "Now you have a thesis for your paper."

Acknowledgement of the negative is as important as *affirmation* of the positive. Address student errors as steps on the way to mastery, not as indicators of terminal failure; the student may already be thinking in those negative terms. If a student is actively working toward an answer, reframe the errors as another kind of learning experience: "You found out that you can't do the steps in that order." "You've seen that you can't draw that conclusion from this information."

Likewise, tutors need to keep their feedback focused on the issues at hand, blending

acknowledgement of the negative with affirmation of the positive to give a realistic picture of what's been accomplished and what remains to be done: "You were able to summarize the main points, but you still need to work on vocabulary." Emphasize what the student has really done to bring about a change in the situation. In most sessions, there are ups and downs -- some things go smoothly, others don't -- and your feedback should reflect both sides.

Questioning is essential to successful learning. It's a classroom staple, used by both teachers and students. In your tutoring sessions, you'll be using questions very frequently in all stages of the process, as you diagnose problems, assess progress, and guide the student toward the answers. This is another key element of the dialogue you and the student need to establish.

Good questions elicit real information. They're open-ended, phrased with words like WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHY and HOW. And they may be just a little ambiguous. Specific questions that will only allow a "yes" or "no" answer don't allow for any elaboration, and to get the information you're seeking, you'll have to keep questioning, as if you're participating in an interrogation. For example, you'll learn more about your student's study habits if you ask, "How do you get ready to study for a test?" than if you ask, "Do you outline the chapter?"

Tag questions can also sabotage your efforts to get real information from your student. These little questions tacked onto statements are just a way of confirming an assumption you've made, and not a way of really learning something new.

If you say, "You're having trouble seeing the differences among these answers, aren't you?" the student can only confirm or deny your supposition. But if you say, "What are the differences among the answers to this question?" the student has the opportunity to act on your supposition and apply a critical thinking concept at the same time.

Questioning is an effective way to sensitize the student to critical thinking strategies. Asking questions like, "How is this information related to what you learned last semester?", "When would you need this information in a hospital emergency room?", or "What else have you read about this subject?" guides the student toward making larger connections and setting the material into a context -- in other words, processing the information holistically. This use of questions is especially helpful in working with reading and study skills, but it also works for solving writing problems -- "What are you trying to say?" "What's the main idea?" "What's the background for this issue?" -- and even dealing with math: "What situations call for this operation?" "What will happen if the decimal point is moved to the right?"

Questioning shouldn't be just a one-way street: tutor to tutee. Encourage students to ask questions too -- of you, of the material, and even of themselves. This is a major step on the way to becoming an active learner. Students should feel comfortable challenging assumptions, seeing a need for further clarification, and learning more about their own ways of thinking, learning and feeling -- and practicing how and when to ask questions, and what questions to ask, is an easy way to get started.

Successful tutoring is an interactive process that's created by its participants. Both you and your student bring expectations, goals and needs to the tutoring session, and through the push and pull of establishing a relationship based on dialogue and respect, the tutoring experience becomes a rewarding one for both sides. One more thing is needed, then, to increase the potential for successful tutoring -- structuring your sessions around five key concepts -- **Orient, Instruct, Practice, Summarize** and **Plan.**

STRUCTURE: ORGANIZING THE TUTORING SESSION

Just as a classroom teacher has to organize a class carefully to ensure that the stated goals are met, so too in tutoring you'll have to take control of the tutoring session and structure it so that it makes the best use of time -- both yours and the student's. This task becomes easier, the more you can apply the five principles of organizing a tutoring session. We'll take a detailed look at each in turn.

Orientation. At the start of each session, not just the first one, it pays to take a few minutes to orient yourself and your student to the task at hand. If this is your first session, it's the time to get acquainted with your student and find out what the student needs to work on -- a task we'll discuss in detail below. If you've met with the student before and you're just picking up where you left off, use this time to establish a sense of continuity and context. Ask the student to summarize what you've covered so far, bring you up to date on what the student's class has been doing with the material, and to fill you in on what needs to be done now. This establishes a

basis for moving into the current agenda. At this point you can also discuss any other concerns the student has, related issues that affect learning, and any outside work you've asked the student to do. This part of the tutoring session is also a good time to practice some holistic thinking strategies by asking the student to relate the current material to other areas of study or to suggest ways in which it might be used in other contexts.

Instruction. After you and the student are oriented toward the task at hand, it's time to begin working with the problem. Instruction can take many forms, depending on what the student's needs might be -- reviewing an assignment together, going through a reading passage, analyzing a sample test, or just answering the student's specific questions. Whatever the demands of the occasion, this is the time for you to call upon your knowledge of the subject and the strategies for dealing with it, and to help the student identify and break through the barriers to efficient learning. Devote this time to providing specific information supported by real strategies the student can apply, not just a lecture on the abstract concepts you know very well. The student needs to come away from the session with a sense of having gained something which can be immediately used to solve real problems.

Practice. As we've just seen, a major function of tutoring is to give students the tools needed to handle learning difficulties independently. The **Instruction** part of the tutoring session should be devoted to developing an understanding of those tools, as well as the ability to apply them. Instruction should be

followed by an opportunity to practice the skills you've been teaching. For example, if you've spent part of the session reviewing the student's nursing math test and discussing ways to correct the errors, you'll want to allow some time within the session for the student to try out these new strategies on some similar problems. Likewise, if you're working with reading comprehension, have the student work through some passages using the concepts you've been teaching, so that you can keep things on track. Don't expect students to listen to a long explanation and then go away and apply the information correctly on their own. Supervised practice, and the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them, is an essential part of learning.

Summarizing. Just as you began the session with an orientation to the issues and a review of material previously covered, close it with a few minutes for taking stock of what you and your student have accomplished, and for summarizing the main points you've covered. You might quickly recap the essential concepts: "Today we reviewed the effects of common psych drugs. You learned about the applications of these drugs and interactions with other medications." Or you can ask the student to sum up the main points which emerged from the session.

At this point, it's also appropriate to provide an overview of the things your student did which positively affected the outcome of the session: "You found your mistakes because you reviewed each stage of the process." "Since you reviewed the concepts at the end of the chapter, you were better prepared to understand the reading." "You can write the assignment now because you clarified what your main point is." This helps to reinforce the notion that the student really can

do things about learning which will make a difference. Make sure before you end the session that all the necessary tasks have been done, and all essential questions answered. This gives both you and the student a sense of closure and completion.

Planning. The last element of the session should involve making plans for the next one. While you'll be doing some planning for yourself before the session begins, you'll still need to wrap up the tutoring period with an explicit rundown of what's going to come next. This reduces misunderstanding and creates a context for the next session. The planning stage might be as simple as saying, "OK, we're going to finish going through the sample questions in Chapter Fifteen next time." Or it might even include some detailed instructions on work you want the student to do to prepare for the next session. Whatever the demands of your situation, it's important for the student -- and you -- to understand precisely what's expected of each side before you continue.

Planning is an outgrowth of summarizing; once you've seen what you've accomplished, it's natural to look toward the next stage. Make sure your student is clear on what that next stage will be before leaving the session. This part of the session might also include any recommendations for other campus learning assistance, general counseling or anything else that helps the student move forward from the tutoring session. Even if the student won't need another session with you, the planning stage could be used to outline strategies the student could apply independently, or even recommendations for further study.

Of course, you'll need to tailor the extent to which you apply these elements to the specifics of your situation. A student with a specific set of short-term needs may not benefit from a lot of orienting or even summarizing; the agenda is already established. Conversely, a student who comes to you with vague and ill-defined problems with "getting it together" will probably benefit most from the application of all the elements in every session; you'll be teaching organization and thinking skills by example as well as explicit instruction. All the concepts we've introduced so far represent different facets of the complex and variable effort known as tutoring; once you're familiar with them you can combine them as needed to handle individual situations.

DIAGNOSING STUDENT PROBLEMS

Common to virtually all tutoring and learning assistance situations is the need to find out the source of the student's academic difficulty. We've already examined some of the ways in which the learning process can go awry, and how blocks to learning can arise from a variety of sources. Now let's take a look at methods to help you track down these and other causes of a student's problems.

In some situations the source of the difficulty is fairly obvious. It's no surprise that a student whose English is riddled with errors in pronunciation and grammar will have difficulties with reading and writing. Or that someone who's working a full-time schedule while going to school is going to have trouble organizing notes and studying efficiently. Also, teachers may refer students to you for problems they've

observed in the classroom. And students themselves are often able to pinpoint at least some of the factors which contribute to the problems. But even so, it pays to investigate the issue yourself with some questions and assessment strategies. Often, what a teacher perceives as the major problem is only the surface manifestation of a complex of issues.

Likewise, students who don't really want to take responsibility for their learning failure may not be inclined to look at the factors that contribute to the problem; they often camouflage it by shifting the blame to outside factors -- "It's not my fault I was late for the lab!" "The teacher never gives us enough time to do the assignments." "Nobody told me I had to turn that in today." "I knew everything on the test but the questions were really weird." Students may even quote their teacher's recommendations as a way of distancing themselves from the problem: "My teacher said my clinic notes aren't clear." It pays, then, to allot orientation time to some gentle questions and assessment techniques to see whether or not the diagnosis the student (or the teacher) presents is really correct.

Whether or not it's the whole story, it's important to begin with students' perceptions of the problem, since they'll be working from that reality. If a student has been referred by a teacher, or if you've consulted with the teacher, you may want to use this information as a starting point: "Your teacher says you're missing important points in the test questions. Is that what's happening?" Or, you might ask the student directly what they're seeking tutoring for, if no information is volunteered. The answer

might be a vague, "I don't know, I just don't seem to be doing anything right," or a very specific self-diagnosis that reflects self-awareness and critical thought: "When I read a passage in the book, I can't figure out what's really important to remember." But just as a doctor needs to probe further to get a complete picture of what's causing an illness, you'll still need to get some more information, either directly or indirectly, to help you decide how to deal with the problem.

The five stages of Schmelzer's learning process model can provide a starting point for diagnosing student problems. By checking the student's strategies at every stage of the process, you may be able to find out what's gone wrong, and where. For example, to learn more about how the student prepares for learning, you might ask such questions as: How do you get ready for studying? How do you organize your notes? What kinds of study strategies do you use? What's your daily schedule like? How much time do you make for studying? What distracts you from studying? The answers will give you some clues as to how successfully the student is organizing and prioritizing for study.

Further questions here might reveal things that the teacher might never know -- a student who's come to you because her instructor has said her last report was disorganized and incomprehensible might tell you that she spent the night before it was due taking care of a personal emergency -- a fact that she's too uncomfortable revealing to a teacher who's insistent that students not put personal concerns above their studies. Students may open up to you about all the factors that they feel their teachers might dismiss or ridicule.

Similarly, you can check for problems with input and processing of information by asking about the student's ability to follow what the teacher says in class, take notes and understand them later, find the main points in a reading selection, or organize thoughts and material before writing. To identify problems with the output phase -- manifested in low grades and poor evaluations -- ask about the student's approach to tests: does the student cram? Get panicked about running out of time? Have problems reading the questions carefully enough or weighing the possible answers? Have problems organizing ideas for a writing assignment?

It may also be helpful to learn a little about your student's learning style and orientation. Ask about ways of processing information -- does the student get lost during lectures, but understand material readily from the textbook? Do pictures and diagrams help, hinder, or make no difference? Does the student have problems remembering or manipulating numbers and formulae? Or have difficulty with linear reasoning? If your student hasn't really thought much about these things, your questions might be the first step toward developing an awareness of the learning process and his own level of learning skills.

Direct observation can also provide essential information. Ask the student to show you samples of homework, written assignments and even tests, if possible. If the problem seems to be connected with study skills, ask to see the student's notes or study aids. And if it looks as if the difficulty lies with reading comprehension

and managing the textbook, have the student read a sample passage and summarize it or discuss it with you. Ask the student to work some sample math problems or write a short paragraph as you watch -- this way you can see firsthand what kind of strategies are being applied to the task.

Once you've analyzed the information you've gotten from all these sources, tell the student what you think the problem is. It may or may not completely coincide with the student's perception, so be explicit in your assessment and tell the student what it implies. For example, if a student comes to you for help in how to find the answers to test questions in the textbook, you may see a deeper problem with active reading and thinking skills, and an inability to apply information to a new context. Let the student know this, and allow opportunities to respond. Then offer some options for solving the problem: "It seems that your problem with test questions is really connected with using your textbook effectively. Do you think that might be true? We'll work on it by finding the key points in the reading and then working through some test questions."

Always be as specific as possible in your assessment. Keep it honest, but not defeatist. Make sure that your student understands that the point of the tutoring situation is to improve -- and that identifying problems is the first step toward solving them. Students are looking for answers, for reassurance, for hope that they can succeed. Nothing is gained by telling a student, "You really didn't get it, did you?" "You should have started studying last week!" "Didn't you listen to what the teacher said?" The student is

already under pressure and expecting the worst -- be straight about the situation but also offer concrete ways to deal with it: "You need to allow yourself more time to study." "Make sure you understand the assignment before you leave class." "First, you need to go through and get your notes in order." Always give the student a feeling that something can be done.

Once you've made a reasonable assessment of the student's problem, work with the student to find ways to address it. Allow the student to feel like a participant, not a recipient, in the quest for solutions. Since the tutoring process is based on a working relationship that will lead to increasing a student's confidence and control, address that issue early on by getting the student's input: "I think it might be helpful to work through some practice test questions and discuss the differences between the answers. We can look for clues in the questions and talk about ways to relate them to the answers. Do you think that's a good place to start?"

Assessment and diagnosis isn't just a one-shot activity. Throughout the course of your tutoring sessions with a particular student, you'll be changing course frequently as new information arises, and adjusting your strategies and plans as the student progresses. Update yourself periodically during the orientation portion of your sessions, taking into account the student's reports of progress, or lack thereof, and any feedback you receive from the instructor. Don't forget to listen to your students' feedback too. Ask if your approach is helpful, and why or why not. Let students suggest activities that might be useful -- this also helps them focus on the process of learning and to contribute to shaping the tutoring experience.

WHEN SAILING ISN'T SMOOTH

So far, we've been discussing the strategies which, when conscientiously applied, should result in a successful tutoring session which leaves both you and your student satisfied that positive steps have been taken to improve learning. But in some cases, try as you might, learning just can't take place. What happens then?

Student behaviors can sometimes present a barrier. A student who's always late, shows up unprepared or just unmotivated can sabotage every good intention you have. Students who turn up intent on turning the session into a teacher-bashing hour can resist all your efforts to keep the work on track. And someone who's angry, resentful or downright hostile over needing tutoring in the first place may ruin any chance of starting off right. Similarly, a student who's not willing to meet you halfway with any kind of real cooperation is only going to cause frustration and resentment.

As we've observed, you have the right to expect certain behaviors and considerations from your students, just as they have the right to expect prompt, professional behavior from you. If a student's behavior or attitude is causing problems in the tutoring relationship, bring it out in the open, as calmly and directly as you can. Focus on your own reactions, not your student's behaviors. If you're confronting a student who's stood you up on several occasions, avoid "you-directed" accusations like "You don't have any consideration for other people! You don't care about passing this class at all."

Instead, focus on yourself. "I-directed" phrases such as--"It really inconveniences me to wait for you and wonder if you're coming", "I get angry when I come in early just to meet you and you don't show up"-- direct attention to the behavior instead of the person, and open up avenues for solving the problem: "I'd appreciate it if you'd call the office and leave a message if you can't make it."

If the problem is really intractable, you may have to tell the student, and maybe the teacher too, that under these conditions you really can't accomplish any tutoring. You can refuse to tutor someone who just won't work with you. That threat alone might be enough to get the student to modify the offending behavior. Or, you might want to suggest another tutor or another avenue for help if you feel that you can't, for whatever reason, work with the student. However, do try to resolve the conflict between the two of you before taking the problem to the faculty level. Encourage the student to help you get things back on track: "We can't work on your notebook if we just end up talking about how unfair your teacher is. Let's get to work so you don't waste your tutoring time. We'll talk about it at the end of the session. How about that?"

Sometimes, the problem isn't connected with the student's behavior, or yours (tutors can end up disliking students or feeling lazy too!) but with the nature of the student's difficulty. If the problem really is beyond your scope, for whatever reason, don't let your pride stand in the way of getting timely help for your student. Remember that as a tutor, you're part of a larger network of learning support on your campus. Take advantage of these other services if they seem more appropriate for your student's needs,

and if you really don't think that tutoring is an effective way to help the student.

So far, we've been discussing the big picture of tutoring, with the goal of providing you with all the essential concepts that make up a successful tutoring encounter: understanding the tutor's role, the learning process and the foundation of a good tutoring session. Keep these considerations in mind, then, as we narrow our focus to nursing specific issues for tutoring, in Unit Four.

ONE STEP FURTHER

Explore at least two of the topics below in your tutor journal. Write as much as you wish on each.

1. What makes a tutoring session successful? What can the student contribute to creating a successful tutoring experience?

2. Why is tutoring most effective when it works on two levels? What are these levels, and how do they interact?

3. What kind of feedback is most useful in a tutoring session? What effect will poor feedback have on the student?

4. Why is orientation important for every tutoring session? What happens in the orientation stage of a session?

5. What are some ways to figure out a student's problem? Under what circumstances would you need to do this?

6. What can you do to handle an uncooperative student? How would you use your communication skills to turn the situation around?

UNIT FOUR:

Practical Strategies For Nursing Tutors

UNIT FOUR: PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR NURSING TUTORS

As we've pointed out in previous units, the special demands of nursing education may not be met by general campus-wide learning assistance services. The core problem areas which affect nursing students -- becoming an active learner and critical thinker, learning to solve problems independently, and managing a number of demanding tasks simultaneously -- can have potentially greater consequences for nursing than for the academic curriculum as a whole. That means, of coure, that nursing tutors will need to know how to deal with failures of learning as they relate to nursing-specific academic tasks. In this unit, we'll take a look at the kinds of problems that send nursing students to tutors, and examine some specific strategies for you to use to help students manage these basic tasks.

While student problems can crop up from many different sources, it's safe to say that most difficulties arise in connection with these fundamental academic activities: *processing texbook information, writing clearly* and *managing test situations.* For nursing we might also add a fourth: *nursing math*, which combines reading and analytical skills with an understanding of mathematical operations. We'll focus here on these essential areas, while acknowledging that you'll also see students for specific tasks that fall outside these parameters. First, however, let's take a look at an issue which touches all these essential academic tasks, and one which your tutoring efforts may have to address -- language.

LANGUAGE SKILLS AND NURSING TASKS

Good language skills are essential for academic success. But as we've noted, language skill deficits can constitute a global learning block which hampers a student's efforts to input, process and utilize information on all levels. Although you aren't an English tutor -- there are tutors in the learning labs dedicated to working with English as a Second Language (ESL) and regular English -- it's important for you to understand in more detail just how language skills can affect a student's overall ability to handle basic academic tasks, and by extension, nursing study.

Of course, a student with truly global language problems isn't likely to be in a nursing program in the first place -- program requirements and entrance testing usually take care of that, ensuring that entering students can handle English at the minimum level of Freshman Composition. So you can reasonably expect that your student has a fundamental ability to handle standard English at a level of difficulty required for nursing. That doesn't mean, however, that language deficits won't contribute to an individual's overall academic performance. So it's important for you to know where difficulties are likely to crop up, and how they relate to other problems.

As we've noted in Unit Three, problems with English can touch both non-native and native speakers. Skill in one area can hide a difficulty in another: A foreign-born student may speak fluently, because that's a skill used every day, but still be a slow reader with problems

managing the higher-level vocabulary in textbooks. Likewise, a student may have a large passive vocabulary for reading and understanding lectures, but still have great difficulty with a writing assignment that calls for actively manipulating grammar. And a thick accent can throw up obstacles for the student who gets straight As on written work. The same situation can apply to native speakers who communicate effectively for everyday purposes in the substandard dialect spoken at home, but who still stumble when required to write or read formal English.

Sometimes the language factor is the real problem. Even the most diligent study habits can be undermined by a lack of vocabulary skills sufficient to handle the readings. A brilliant paper can be rendered incomprehensible by poor grammar and sentence structure. In many cases, though, the student's difficulties with English are only one contributing factor to a bigger complex of learning problems. Even though you aren't an English tutor, you can help students to reduce the impact of language problems on their overall performance.

Assuming the problem isn't so severe as to render the student virtually unable to manage even the basics of nursing study (an unlikely situation, as we've observed), your role is less that of an ESL or English tutor than it is that of a strategy coach. And strategies to deal with language problems can be taught in the context of the larger issues for which the student has most likely come to you -- reading, writing and test-taking.

In language, as in the other skill areas we've been discussing, students can develop an active

awareness of the problems and the strategies to help themselves. If you've determined that English skills are indeed a factor, help the student identify situations in which the problem arises. For example, if your student says that it's hard to read a textbook because of too many unfamiliar words, have the student isolate those words in a sample text. Or if a teacher has circled a number of grammar errors in a written assignment, go through it and make sure the student can identify the reason for the marks.

Encourage students to consider the context of the problems. What do they have in common? Perhaps the student with reading difficulty can see that most of the unfamiliar words are abstractions ending in -ion. Or, the writer can determine that it's passive constructions which are causing most of the problems.

Once students feel comfortable analyzing their own problem spots, you can begin to explore self-help strategies. Ask your student where to find a solution to the problems. Is the student aware of grammar self-study guides and vocabulary development workbooks? Does the student know how to use a dictionary or thesaurus? Can the student pinpoint what kinds of study aids might be useful for extra practice?

You may want to brush up yourself on some essentials of English grammar, simply to help yourself focus on the issues at hand. And, of course, if the student's difficulties with English are too global to respond to an incidental discussion in your tutoring session, you may need to refer the student to general ESL or English tutoring to resolve the issues before you can even begin to focus on nursing. Don't let your

tutoring session get sidetracked into a grammar or vocabulary lesson; keep in mind your focus on language as a factor affecting your student's success with the larger nursing related study issues we'll be exploring now.

MASTERING NURSING TEXTS: ACTIVE READING STRATEGIES

One of the most common complaints among students in all disciplines is that there's too much reading, and that their texts are hard to understand. This is especially true in a field like nursing, where texts are written at a 12th or 14th grade level and full of technical information that calls upon a specialized vocabulary and concepts unique to the profession. Add to that the sheer volume of reading to be done just to keep up with essential information, and you have the potential for real problems among students who are already struggling to keep their heads above water academically.

Since you're a successful nursing student, you may not really know what it feels like to stare at pages of text, frustrated and panicked at not being able to absorb a thing, and intimidated by the sheer number of words to get through. Students themselves often can't really put their finger on the problem, yet they know it's there: "There's just so much reading I always get behind." "I can't figure out what it's talking about." "Nothing sticks in my mind."

Your first task will be to sort out what's really behind this kind of vague complaint. Ask if all the individual vocabulary words are clear. Are there a lot of unfamiliar words and concepts? Does the student have to consult a dictionary frequently while reading? This can make it impossible to

finish a reading in the required time, and severely handicap a student on tests, where reference materials aren't allowed. How long does it actually take the student to finish a required reading?

You'll also need to find out how information is processed and stored. Can the student remember the main points of a reading a day, two days later? Or is it all a blur? Can the student quickly locate needed information in the textbook, and use the index, table of contents and other reference aids? Some students may not even realize these things function like guideposts in the text.

Assuming that your student doesn't have an organic learning disability or grossly underdeveloped reading skills (reading at the fourth-grade level, for example, rather than at the ninth), your efforts will most likely need to focus on increasing the student's awareness of existing reading habits, and improving the ability to interact with the text.

We've noted that at-risk students may not be aware that learning is an active process subject to manipulation. These students may not realize that their skills need to change and grow to keep pace with the new challenges they meet as they progress in their studies. And they may not know that reading is a multifaceted skill that adapts to the material to be read.

To most people, reading is reading -- it's the same whether you're reading a novel, a scientific journal, or *TV Guide*. They think that the level of mental involvement and activity is identical for all three. Not realizing that a romance novel and

an article on hypoglycemia don't call for the same reading skills may be at the basis of a student's reading problem.

A subset of active learning is active reading -- an essential component of that complex of thinking and problem-solving skills we cited as being essential to success in nursing. That means that students have to be encouraged to make the transition from passive to active reading -- and to learn the strategies which contribute to extracting meaning, not just processing words.

Encourage students to explore the text physically. How is it arranged on the page? Are there headings and subheadings within each section? Is there a summary, or a list of key points, at the end? Does it have illustrations, photos or charts? What about side bars and other supporting material? How do all these elements contribute to the overall message of the reading passage? All too often, students don't realize that a text can carry its own aids to understanding.

Help the student to identify elements of the basic pattern of American academic writing, as studied in English Composition classes: *thesis, support, conclusion.* In other words, there's usually an introductory part that states the main idea, followed by the specific information that clarifies, supports or elaborates on it. Finally, there's a conclusion that summarizes the key points and indicates their significance or implications. So it goes in texts of all lengths, creating chains of complexity from the sentence level to the paragraph, on to the larger essay, chapter and book structures. If your student learns to regard textbook material in terms of this general format, it becomes easier to look

for the needed information -- to spot key ideas early in the passage, or summarized at the end, and to find details to support these ideas farther into each unit of text, whether it's a paragraph, a subheading or a whole chapter.

Work with the student to identify the organizing structure of a passage that's causing problems, and to find the main points. Then have the student do the same on another piece of text. It might be helpful to have the student highlight the main ideas in one color, and the supporting material in another, as an aid to locating the various parts of the text.

Understanding the physical structure of the general academic text is the first step toward gaining control of it. Once the student catches on to interacting with the text in this way, it's time to begin working on the conceptual level, integrating the material in the reading with what the student already knows, and with the overall context of the class and the nursing curriculum as a whole.

Encourage your student to draw on preexisting knowledge about the subject. Pre-reading strategies can help here. Select a new reading in the subject area you're working on. Ask the student to look at the title and predict what the text is all about. Have the student read any summations and questions as well as headings before beginning the text.

Ask the student to relate the topic to previous readings. How is this information related to material the student already knows? Why does a nurse need this information? What other information does one need to know in order to

understand this material? Guide the student from the text to the larger context. If a reading is about new treatments for hypertension, have the student connect it to other issues, such as pharmacology, elder care, diet and cardiovascular disease.

Encourage the student to work actively with the text by finding and marking key words and phrases, underlining passages for questions or emphasis, making notes in the margin, listing questions the text should answer, and analyzing the structure of the material before beginning to read. Students should realize that it's OK to question the text, challenge the author, and dispute the conclusions.

Make sure, too, that students practice summarizing and encapsulating main points. Have them read a sample passage, close the book, and then state what they've just read without referring back to the text. Encourage students to keep notes in their own words, not just a copy of the text. Students can't always see the relative importance of ideas; focusing on the essentials retained after reading is one way to develop this facility.

Active reading skills aren't just for managing class assignments. Being an active reader can also improve a student's performance on nursing tests, many of which are based on the case study/scenario format. Show students how active reading can transfer from textbook material to test material: the same strategies for finding key information and essential words apply, as do pre-reading strategies which help to predict the subject. Have students practice extracting the essentials from sample test

questions, relating the material to its context, and predicting what the answer choices will be. Students unaccustomed to seeing test-taking as a reading-based skill may miss essential words and concepts, skipping qualifiers like "always" and "never" and failing to see the relationship between the information in the question and the structure of the answer choices. Although there are other skills involved in test-taking, the ability to read actively forms the foundation on which they can be developed.

TUTORING FOR WRITING

Students usually seek help for writing projects at two points in the assignment: when preparing a paper to turn in, or after getting a low grade on a completed assignment. In the first situation, the student wants help to prevent a problem. In the second, the goal is a post-mortem on what went wrong. Whatever the case, the issues are generally the same: the student has lost track of the main ideas, can't see the assignment objectively and has no sense of its larger context. As a tutor, your job is to help students to marshal all the necessary skills and develop the strategies necessary to meet the requirements of the assignment.

In general, referring someone to the campus-wide writing center for a nursing paper may not guarantee that the student will get appropriate help to do the assignment as the instructor intended. Why not? The writing center tutor is used to working with English Composition and other humanities-related writing assignments. The kind of paper demanded by a class on 19th-century poets may not be like one assigned in pediatrics. So the nursing student may get help on general structure and organization, but not

much in the way of guidance on how to meet the nursing-specific requirements of the assignment.

Writing for nursing, like writing for any discipline, has specific purposes and conventions, and the student needs to understand them and be able to adapt writing style and learning strategies to meet a variety of expectations in any given class, not just the program as a whole. For example, a charting exercise might be followed by a research report, and clinical notes might accompany a full-scale term paper. Being able to adapt to these changing tasks is similar to being able to switch reading styles to accommodate differing texts. And the ability to identify and draw on all the resources needed to carry out these tasks plays a major role in active writing.

Those essential resources are often simply the basics of effective writing as defined in standard college-level English classes: how to establish a thesis, develop support, organize a bibliography and follow general academic format in the presentation of the work. These are principles that nursing students are assumed to have encountered before entering the program; teachers frequently don't state them explicitly when making writing assignments. But all too often students aren't able to transfer these skills from English class to other kinds of writing they're called upon to do: "That was composition class! This is nursing now!"

In some cases, your tutorial session on writing problems might consist almost completely of just reminding the student of the relevance of the concepts learned in English class, and demonstrating why the assignment in question

doesn't pass muster. Review the concepts of effective writing as presented in any standard English text, and help the student to place the nursing assignment into that framework. Then you can turn, if needed, to the content of the assignment itself.

Begin work from the top down. Ask the student what the assignment is calling for. Students may not be clear on this essential point -- another belief as common as the one that English class is unconnected to any other classes and their writing tasks is the notion that all assignments are really the same: you just spew words out on paper and hope for the best. But if the teacher wants a student to do an objective analysis of a hospital encounter, subjective remarks or personal comments won't fulfill the assignment. Likewise, if what the teacher is looking for is a synthesis of material from several articles in nursing journals, wriiting up a book report on just one isn't going to get many points.

Ask the student to state as clearly as possible what the assignment is -- what is it for? What will the student learn by doing it? What specifically did the teacher tell the students to do? Try to see an assignment sheet if possible. Go over it with the student. Ask the student to relate this assignment to others in the class -- why did the teacher assign this particular task? How will this writing assignment contribute to the overall goals of the course -- and of nursing?

Once the student demonstrates an understanding of the point of the assignment and the kinds of writing tasks it calls for, it's time to turn to the content itself -- save mechanical problems with language and form for the last. Whether the student is consulting you for help in

the writing stages, or for help in seeing what went wrong, the question is the same: What are you trying to say? What is the main point you want to make in this piece?

Regardless of what kind of writing task is at hand, it's important to have a clear message, backed up by details. This holds just as true for a write-up on a visit with a hospital patient as it does for a research report on advances in cardiac care. But students who have problems expressing themselves in writing often just begin to put words down without any clear sense of where the piece is going -- they don't realize that they have to exercise control over the writing process and direct the ideas into a coherent form.

If the student has text, read it. Does the student's statement about the main point correspond to what's on the page? Chances are that it doesn't. Explore the discrepancy between what the student wants to say and what has actually been written. Often, the verbal encapsulation of the message is all the student needs to go on and develop the assignment more fully. If not, probe further -- what else does the student need to do to make this message clear? In other words, are more details needed? Perhaps more specific information on an individual's symptoms or behavior? Additional research? Lead the student to be explicit about what's needed -- and to check the written work for the presence of these elements.

If the presentation is skimpy in any of the essential areas, or if the material is so muddled that it's impossible to find a main point, encourage the student to outline, list or even say

aloud the key ideas and elements of the paper. Talk it out first, then write it down. Or, for students with other learning styles, have them draw diagrams, make lists or outlines -- anything that will provide a clear idea of what's present and what's missing. The same holds true for an assignment that's already been graded. Have the student work through it again, and then compare that with the original, to see where things went wrong.

Although the most serious writing problems occur on the content level, don't forget that students can lose grade points for mechanics too -- grammar, spelling and presentation. That's what most students think of as "writing" anyway, not the conceptual structure, so make sure that your student understands the need to see the assignment on both levels -- and that the mechanics are the last thing to think about. Let the student find the errors, but don't just hand out the answer -- "You spell it like this," "That's the past perfect, not the simple past." Guide the student to figure out what's wrong, and to formulate strategies for fixing the problem: "Where can you go to check the spelling of this word?" "What kind of action in the past are you talking about?"

Effective writing -- in nursing as in any other field -- is a facet of the same complex of critical thinking skills that forms the foundation for academic success. And here, as in other areas, your primary job as a tutor is to guide your student to take control of the assignment, to look at the task critically and to understand it in its larger context of nursing preparation.

NURSING MATH: MORE THAN JUST FIGURES

Many people claim that they have problems with math because they just don't have a head for figures. But in nursing, math is not just numbers: Mastering math calls upon formulae and mathematical operations, but also reading and analytical skills. So, students seeking help with math problems may not realize that the difficulty may not lie with the numbers but with their context -- the "word problem" that presents the task.

Students may bring problem sets for work in the tutoring session, or if the problem allows, actual math tests for analysis. Either way, your task is the same: to work with the student on the dual levels of numbers and language.

Begin with reading comprehension, applying the same strategies you'd use with any other kind of reading problem. Make sure the student understands the parameters of the problem -- converting a dosage from one medium to another, as in solid to liquid, or increasing or lowering amounts, for example. Are there any limiting words or phrases that, if missed, might affect the answer? Are there any words in the problem that the student just doesn't know?

Once the student understands what the problem actually says, and can identify all the essential words and phrases, it's time to turn to the mechanics -- the real mathematical operations needed to solve the problem. Is it a matter of finding percentages? Ratios or proportions? How will the student set the problem up? After the student has identified the

needed elements and operations, work through the problem step by step. Analyze each stage of the problem to catch the point at which the error appears. In many cases, the difficulty can be traced to a repeating pattern of mistakes which, once identified, can be eliminated -- misplacing decimal points, for example, or skipping a step. It might be helpful to talk through the operation with the student while doing it on paper.

It's important, too, for students to realize the consequences of carelessness. For many students, math is to be dreaded and feared, and certainly to be avoided as much as possible. These students don't want to look too closely at their own errors, or to invest the effort needed to be as precise as possible -- "It's just a decimal point." So the student needs to understand nursing math as something more than abstract textbook exercises of the kind you might encounter in a college math class. Nursing math is practical math, with consequences reaching far beyond the problems on the page -- within the larger context of nursing, lives depend on the precision and accuracy with which a nurse can carry out the necessary conversions and dosage measures.

TEST-TAKING AND STUDY SKILLS

Helping students to prepare for tests often takes up the bulk of a tutor's allotted work time, especially just before peak testing times such as midterms and final exams, when anxiety runs high and the threat of failure can loom just around the corner. Your task in improving students' test-taking skills is once again to help the student to see the big picture -- to understand the testing process and to become

aware of the kinds of skills needed to handle the test successfully.

Every nursing student is familiar with the array of study guides and test-taking manuals available in any bookstore. Students who seek tutoring may already have used these, but continue to have problems connecting the material they've studied to the test questions -- primarily because these test-taking guides don't address the wider context in which students' difficulties are rooted.

Obviously, a significant factor in test-taking is students' study habits. A student who doesn't keep up with daily classwork, readings, and study sessions, and who doesn't organize materials well is going to have problems with integrating all the necessary information and concepts in a timed testing situation. To check for these preparation level problems, ask the student about test preparation strategies. How much time is allocated for studying? What kind of materials does the student actually use to study -- textbook, notes, handouts? Find out what the student considers important to learn, and how he prioritizes the material. A student who shrugs and says, "everything" is probably trying to memorize the textbook and other materials in the hope that the information matches what appears on the test. Other students may simply not allot enough time to studying and then spend the night before the test in panicked cramming.

For many students, however, the real problems with test taking go beyond inefficient study strategies -- and may sabotage even the student who practices successful ones. These strategies may not be working because of a problem at the process level -- of really understanding the

purposes and structure of the test itself. If a student doesn't understand why nursing tests are constructed the way they are, it's virtually impossible to adapt study skills to meet the testing challenge.

Understanding nursing tests calls once again on critical thinking and active reading skills, and the ability to adjust to a different rationale for testing. Students who are used to traditional testing structures and methods expect tests to be atomistic and predictable -- a test ought to cover only the material just studied, multiple choice tests have just one right answer, and questions are directly based on the book. A more complex analysis of issues is usually reserved for essay tests. That's why students may feel betrayed when a test on Chapter Five also brings in material from the first four chapters, or even from outside the book entirely, and why they press teachers to tell them exactly what's on the test and precisely what pages they need to study to get a good grade. It's also why they complain about unfair testing when a question is ambiguous or allows for more than one possible answer.

Students bring these assumptions to nursing, where testing frequently relies less on memorized facts than on analytical thinking and problem solving. In these situations, the student is expected to draw on all available knowledge to select the best response to a situation with lots of variables.

The test structure that causes many student problems is the scenario-analysis-response variety: read about a situation and select the best responses to a series of questions based on

the information in the scenario. Success on this kind of test depends on active reading, holistic thinking and logic -- skills the student may not even realize are needed.

Helping the student to think holistically about nursing knowledge is the first step. As we've pointed out in the discussion on critical thinking, students need to think of their studies not as unrelated, closed activities but as elements in an ever-widening pool of knowledge to be drawn on as the need arises. To help students better understand the "big picture" of nursing texts, work from sample test questions from test-taking guides for the Nursing Board Exams or the study questions in textbooks -- or real tests, if they're available.

Have the student read a sample question set and apply active reading strategies for understanding of the content -- sum up what the question is about and locate key points that may be relevant. Connect the question to its larger context. Ask the student to name the kinds of information and knowledge needed to work through the question. For example, in a scenario discussing a seventy-year-old diabetic man who's suffering episodes of disorientation and memory loss, the student should be able to identify the various fields of knowledge a nurse needs to draw on in order to respond intelligently to the individual's needs -- diabetes, elder care, medication side effects, and so on.

Evaluate the questions and all their possible answers. Test taking guides for nursing students discuss the rationales behind the answer choices. But in order to take advantage of this information, your student has to realize that the answers do have rationales, and that there may

not be just one categorically right response in a field of completely wrong ones. Students who aren't aware of the fact that nursing tests operate along the lines of shades of grey rather than black and white may not even know that in some cases the answers given may all be theoretically "right" but only one is the best for a given test question.

Using the study guide, work through the rationales with the student. Make sure the student understands how to prioritize the answers, from least to most appropriate, and how to locate and use clues in the scenarios and the questions themselves to get to the best response. It may seem as if you're just repeating what's already been said in the study guides, but the student who's come to you for help obviously hasn't benefited from simply working through the books. This student needs help to relate the information to real tests, and the opportunity to practice the kinds of thinking skills needed to understand the test format.

Of course, nursing texts do follow different formats, depending on what kind of material is being tested; the traditional style of asking the student to demonstrate a knowledge of facts and pure information from readings and class lectures is certainly a part of the nursing curriculum, too. In all these cases, though, it's still essential to begin with a holistic understanding of what the test demands and what strategies and knowledge the student must draw on in order to respond to it. Whatever the testing situation, encourage students to respond actively to the test -- pinpointing key points, asking questions such as, "What am I supposed to demonstrate on this test?" and relating test

questions to the larger body of nursing knowledge that's been acquired up to this point.

Helping a student to become a successful test-taker in nursing, or to handle any other challenge posed by nursing or the academic world in general, draws on all the tutoring skills and concepts we've discussed so far in this book. By applying your own knowledge of learning theory and tutoring processes, combined with nursing study and specific course content, you're now ready to take your place as an essential part of your school's learning resources: to help students actively develop the skills and strategies they need to meet any challenges their studies may hold.

ONE STEP FURTHER

Apply the concepts you've learned in this chapter as you work through at least two of these questions in your tutor journal.

1. How do language problems affect successful nursing study? How can you diagnose this kind of difficulty?

2. What makes an active reader? Why is active reading so important in nursing?

3. How can holistic processing help someone having problems with a writing assignment? What can you do in a tutoring session to help a student see things holistically?

4. Why is nursing math more than just numbers? What skills will a student need to successfully handle math in a nursing context?

5. What makes nursing tests different from

typical tests in college classes? What's the most essential skill a student can call upon to handle nursing test questions? How will you help your student to develop those skills?

RESOURCES

RESOURCES

As you continue to work as a tutor, you may want to delve more deeply into some of the concepts of learning theory, interpersonal relations, and personal development which form the foundation for this book. The following resource list provides suggested materials for further reading in all these areas, ranging from specialized research to self-help books for the layman.

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